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DISCUSSION PAPER 2

THE RADICAL ANGLO-CATHOLIC SOCIAL VISION

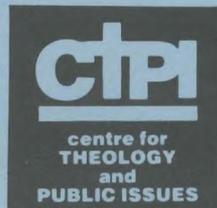
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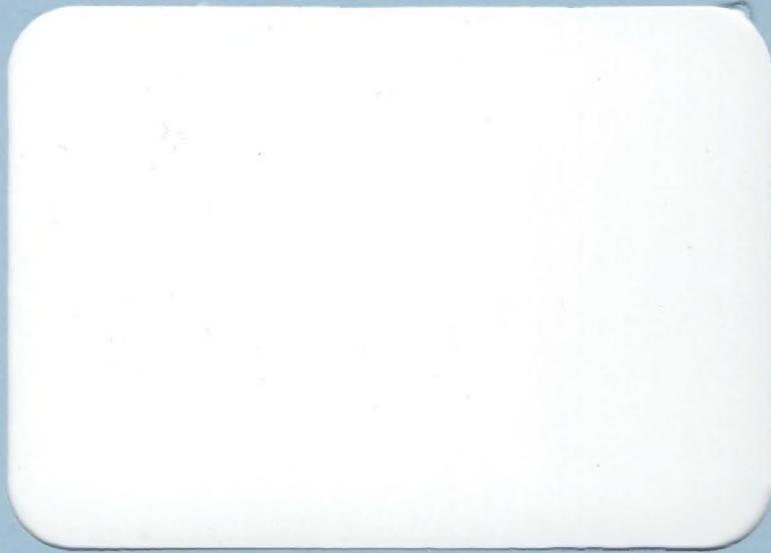
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... priest Frederick ...

DISCUSSION PAPERS



CENTRE FOR THEOLOGY AND PUBLIC ISSUES, NEW COLLEGE,
MOUND PLACE, EDINBURGH, EH1 2LU



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THE RADICAL ANGLO-CATHOLIC SOCIAL VISION

KENNETH LEECH

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"The political forces of the Left in the western world are fragmented and have quantitatively minor influence. And they are so far failing to throw up commanding leaders who can rally them to future constructive forward movement." Thus wrote the Anglo-Catholic Marxist priest Frederick Hastings Smyth on 31st August 1942 (1). Smyth faithfully reflected one strand within the Anglo-Catholic movement which had begun at Oxford in 1833. But the Oxford fathers would have been confused and baffled by him, and, had they understood his thinking, horrified. Smyth's *Manhood into God* (2) was the first major attempt to integrate Thomist theology and dialectical materialism. He was one among many Anglo-Catholics who combined a revolutionary political position with a Catholic theology. The Second Vatican Council was to make it possible for that strand to become a world tradition.

My aim is to articulate a vision of human society arising from and nourished by a Catholic socialist perspective. And at the start I am presented with a two-fold problem. First, I am not sure that Anglo-Catholicism as a discrete phenomenon still exists. However, secondly, if it does, I am quite sure it offers no radical social vision. So I speak of resources which need to be recovered rather than of a movement with a confessing agenda.

When we speak of the Anglo-Catholic tradition we may mean one of at least three movements. There is, first, the Tractarian movement, which began at Oxford in July 1833, focussing on the spiritual autonomy of the church and looking back to the early fathers, emphasising catholicity and the revival of the sacramental life. Or, secondly, there is ritualism which began with the spread of sacramental religion to the new towns and to city slums such as London Docks in 1856. Ritualism became a political issue and priests were imprisoned for ritual and ceremonial offences under the Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874. Or we may think, thirdly, of the Catholic socialist tradition which began with Stewart Headlam and the Guild of St Matthew in the 1870s and continued with Conrad Noel, John Groser, Stanley Evans and many others in the 20th Century.

What became known as Anglo-Catholicism was a fusion of the first and second movements. It was a form of Christianity which emphasised the centrality of the sacraments, especially of eucharistic worship and sacramental confession, and the need for intense personal devotion. Many of the positive aspects of that tradition have now been absorbed into post-Vatican 2 Roman Catholicism and into many Protestant traditions. Anglo-Catholicism as a separate phenomenon continues to exist as a kind of marginal moveemnt which is increasingly cut off from all the creative currents in the Christian world. It represents, in my view, an exhausted religious culture, and yet out of it may emerge some fruits. Samson's experience when investigating the carcass of the dead lion is not without its relevance.

The emergence of Anglo-Catholic socialism

It was in the third phase of the movement, from the late 1870s onwards, that a new theological synthesis was created through a fusion of the theology of F.D.Maurice with the sacramentalism of the Oxford Movement. It was this fusion which created the phenomenon of Anglo-Catholic socialism, most clearly manifested in the establishment of the Guild of St Matthew (GSM) at Bethnal Green in 1877, the first explicitly socialist group in Britain, and which led to the volume *Lux Mundi* and the establishment of the Christian Social Union (CSU) in 1889. From Headlam and the GSM there grew up a rebel tradition associated with such figures as Thomas Hancock (who spoke of "the banner of Christ in the hands of the socialists" and called the Magnificat "the hymn of the universal social revolution"), Charles Marson, author of *God's Cooperative Society*, and Conrad Noel, parish priest of Thaxted and one of the founders of the British Socialist Party. From the CSU developed a more genteel and liberal tradition of social critique, pragmatic and reformist in its approach, and very Anglican in its style. Its key figures were B.F.Westcott, Charles Gore and Henry Scott Holland. This tradition of social incarnational sacramental religion dominated mainstream Anglican thought from the 1880s to the death of William Temple in 1944. The publication of *Lux Mundi* in 1889 and of Gore's Bampton Lectures in 1891 were of crucial importance. As Michael Ramsey wrote: "It was an outcome of the *Lux Mundi* appeal to the Logos doctrine that both democracy and socialism were held to be expressions of the working of the divine spirit" (3).

The socialism of which these thinkers wrote was of an evolutionary and reformist kind. Westcott defined it as the principle of cooperation as against that of individualism,

and said that socialism and individualism corresponded to two conflicting views of humanity. It is true that Westcott gave Christian socialism respectability and legitimacy, and in the process diluted it (4). That tradition, articulated most memorably in the thought of William Temple, provided the specifically Christian basis for the welfare state -a term first used by Temple. (5).

But the Catholic tradition also nourished on its periphery a more revolutionary movement. Conrad Noel ridiculed the CSU as a mere talk shop. "Here's a pressing social problem: let's read a paper about it". These people, Noel complained, believed that the mighty would be put down from their thrones so gently that they would not feel the bump when they hit the ground. Noel's Catholic Crusade, formed in 1918 after the Russian Revolution, was committed to involvement in revolutionary struggle. While on many issues it was naive and uncritical (though no more than many others), it represents the libertarian and prophetic tradition of Anglo-Catholic socialism at its best. Rowan Williams has claimed that of all the early leftist movements it comes closest to liberation theology (6). The Crusade finally collapsed in the aftermath of the Stalin-Trotsky dispute. When George Orwell wrote that Anglo-Catholicism was the ecclesiastical equivalent of Trotskyism, he was correct in ways that he did not intend, for one of the reasons given by the Communist Party for the expulsion of the early Trotskyists was their association with Noel and the Crusade (7).

There were then two traditions of Anglo-Catholic socialism: a middle class, reformist, liberal tradition of social reform; and a more grass roots tradition, rooted in concrete struggles, a tradition of "socialism from below".

Weaknesses of the tradition

As a movement and a tradition, Anglo-Catholicism has some serious weaknesses, and at times one must speak of pathological growths. It has been a very English movement, at times arrogantly nationalist in its perception of Catholic identity. It has promoted clericalism, that distortion of priesthood which has so defaced and damaged the Christian church. In its English and its exported forms, it has not been untainted by racism, though the majority of Anglo-Catholics are black, and its traditional strongholds are in Central and South Africa and the Caribbean. Yet in its public face it manifests the perspectives and the interests of white men of English and North American backgrounds. (Though it should be noted that the first female bishop in any church within the Catholic tradition is a black woman of Anglo-Catholic background.) Specifically, Anglo-Catholicism has been associated with three features which have, at certain times and places, assumed the dimensions of a serious illness.

The first is a profound inability to cope with issues of human sexuality, resulting in a dread of women which often reaches the point of real gynophobia. The central problem here lies in the historic and ambivalent relationship between Anglo-Catholicism and homosexuality, a relationship which goes back to the early years of the movement, and which calls for a separate paper.

The second feature is an organic and rigidly hierarchical view of both church and society which veers towards a kind of fascism. Again this can only be adequately dealt with in another paper. But clearly the European roots of fascism lie in a Catholic social vision, articulated most memorably in the Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931.

Many Anglo-Catholics, particularly those of a Papalist outlook, have shared in this view of the social order of which the fascist state was the culmination.

However, there is a third serious problem within the Anglo-Catholic culture: its creation of a world within a world. Valerie Pitt has described the growth of Anglo-Catholicism as a type of cultural distortion which deviated more and more from the world of reality. By creating a world within a world, she claims,

the Tractarians unconsciously made religion a life substitute rather than a life revealer, not a way into the splendours of the visible world but a way out. That habit of mind is fixed in us still, and ultimately it is destructive of religion itself (8).

Yet I believe that a scrutiny of, and a critical encounter with, the distortions of this and other historical formations is an important way of understanding our own dilemmas and challenges. For in the history and dilemmas of Anglo-Catholicism we see features which have characterised and disfigured religion as a whole in the modern world.

For, in spite of all this, we are speaking of a tradition of great richness, theological depth and vision. It offers a way of being a Christian which takes account both of the need to have doctrinal and spiritual roots in a historic tradition, and of the need to develop a dialectical encounter with the agenda of contemporary society. In the light of this tradition I want to offer three suggestions and to explore them briefly.

First, I want to suggest that socialism, a form of society in which wealth is owned by the community and in which the productive process is controlled by the workers, is

compatible with a Catholic view of humanity and of the social order in a way that capitalism is not. Even the strongly anti-socialist encyclicals of the popes from Leo XIII to Pius XII are much more anti-capitalist (even though it is a pre-capitalist critique of capitalism.) Since Vatican 2 and the currents of thought which have come from Latin America, the possibilities for a creative movement of Catholic vision in shaping a socialist society are much greater, and I believe that there is much within the Anglo-Catholic tradition which could support this movement theologically.

Secondly, I suggest that the only way out of the present crisis of the church in the west is by the transcendence of the conceptual limitations of Reformation theology, especially of its individualism. But this cannot be accomplished by a return to mediaevalism or to the Catholicism of the European Counter-Reformation. The only hope for a Christian response to the contradictions and dilemmas of contemporary capitalism lies in a renewed Catholicism which is able to engage with the structures of advanced technological society. I believe that the tradition which combines a Catholic theology with an openness to modern critical thought and experience is the most hopeful way ahead.

Thirdly, I suggest, with the American black theologian Cornel West, that, while Christianity and Marxism are the most distorted traditions in the modern world, an alliance between prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism offers the last humane hope for humankind (9). For many years the only serious attempt to relate Christianity to Marxism in practical terms was among Anglo-Catholics. In spite of its manifest failures, limitations and weaknesses, the theological framework of Anglo-Catholicism offers the best hope in this area.

The radical Anglo-Catholic social vision

So we need to ask: what kind of social vision emerges from the Anglo-Catholic tradition?

First, it is a corporate vision. It is a social vision, a vision of a cooperative society, a community bonded together by a fundamental and unbreakable solidarity, a community of equals. Central to Anglo-Catholic theology is its emphasis on the church as the body of Christ and as an integral element in the proclamation of the gospel. Michael Ramsey's book *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (1936) was of fundamental importance in shaping a theological tradition which took seriously both the New Testament and the liturgical renewal and did so in an ecumenical way. It undermined the liberal tradition with its impatience with doctrine and its division between gospel and church, and it prepared the theological ground for what became known as "Christian sociology". Ramsey's book included a strong attack on liberal individualism.

"Individualism", he wrote, "has no place in Christianity, and Christianity, verily, means its extinction" (10) In fact individualism has its roots in a particular interpretation of Reformation theology, and it is here that we find the Christian dimension within Thatcherism. It is an interpretation which is in fundamental conflict with a Catholic vision.

Many years after Ramsey's book, John Robinson was to claim that the doctrine of the body of Christ was "the specifically Christian clue to the renewal of society" while John Davies saw it as the key doctrine in the Anglo-Catholic resistance to apartheid in South Africa (11). It is worth remembering that the best known Anglo-Catholic bishop in the world today is Desmond Tutu. Apartheid involved the belief that

Christian love did not have to be expressed in visible material structures. Against this 20th Century version of the Eutychian heresy, the very traditional Anglo-Catholics of the Reeves-Huddleston generation insisted that Christianity demanded a material and social embodiment. A high doctrine of the church became a key element in the resistance to "the novel nonsense of upstart racism" (12).

It was in its stress on the body, on communion and sharing, and in its rejection of individualism in religion, that the link between Anglo-Catholicism and socialism was forged. "Those who assist at Holy Communion", insisted Stewart Headlam, "are bound to be Holy Communists" (13). It was not possible to maintain the eucharistic principles of common life and equality without those principles being extended to the social order outside the sanctuary -unless, of course, one maintained a kind of dualism which preserved church and society in separate compartments.

Secondly, it is a materialistic vision. It is a vision which is deeply and unashamedly materialistic, which values the creation, which rejoices in the physical, in the flesh, in human sexuality, and which is rooted in the principle that matter is the vehicle of spirit, not its enemy. When Temple said that Christianity was the most materialistic of all religions, he stood within a long tradition of incarnational and sacramental materialism. It not only saw bread and wine as symbols of the transformation of all human resources; it saw the material world as the primal sacrament from which all others derived. Anglo-Catholic theology refuses to tolerate a division between matter and spirit, or any disparaging of matter or the physical. To despise and undervalue the creation is to despise its Creator. Catholic Christianity stands or falls on this sacramental principle: and this must involve a break with those movements of Christian

thought which see the spiritual as the antithesis of the material, and concern for social and economic justice as a hindrance to true spirituality. Such dualism is deeply alien to a sacramental materialism. Anglo-Catholic social theology is, I believe, basically at odds with philosophical idealism, and is rooted in a realist and materialist approach to the world.

At the very core of Anglo-Catholic spirituality and of the Anglo-Catholic social tradition is the doctrine of incarnation. But the tradition has not simply emphasised the Word made flesh as the basis of a movement of compassion, care and service: it has emphasised equally the "taking of manhood into God", the theme of the incarnation as a continuing process of transformation. It therefore offers a type of Christian theology and Christian practice which does not lay so much stress on human fallenness and original sin that it undermines the basis for Christian social action. Rather it lays stress on grace operating in and through the material and historical processes, and on the image of God in all people. It works with a high and optimistic view of human potential, and of the power of grace to transcend the limitations of nature. And this has important political implications.

Thirdly, it is a vision of transformation, of a transformed society, not simply an improved one. At the heart of Anglo-Catholic spirituality is the eucharistic offering with its two-fold emphasis on offering and consecration. Bread and wine, fruits of the earth *and* work of human hands, products not only of nature but of the industrial process, are, at the eucharistic offertory, brought within the redemptive process. In Smyth's words:

The bread and wine at the offertory set forth structures in history which have been brought out of the fallen world into the first stage of its redemption (14).

In contrast to Andrew Carnegie in 1889 and to Margaret Thatcher in 1989, both of whom insist that Christian ethics are only concerned with the second stage of wealth, its use, the liturgical offertory sees the movement of creation and of production as equally important. For it is impossible to offer to God the fruits of injustice and oppression, as Irenaeus saw in the 2nd Century. Eucharistic worship implies and indeed depends upon the process of production as an element in the divine encounter. It involves a rejection of pagan harvest festival religion which, through a theology of vegetable marrows, avoids the hard questions of manufacturing industry and seeks a way to God through matter which bypasses the need for redemption (15).

The eucharist, however, is not only about offering to God the fruits of labour: it is about the transformation, in Thomist language the transubstantiation, of matter to become the material of the resurrection. At the very heart of worship is the reality of change, of the sanctifying power of the Spirit to transform both the material things and the community. A theology which places the transformation of material structures and of human relations at the heart of its liturgy and life should be a theology which is open to the need for such transformation in the economic and political life of society.

Fourthly, this tradition is a rebel tradition. The Tractarian movement began as a critique of the church/Tory alliance and as a protest against state control of the church. In no other sense can it be said that the Tractarians were social radicals.

But in their rejection of the politics of the ecclesiastical establishment, they sowed the seeds of a tradition of nonconformity and of dissent in other areas. And this culture of dissent was intensified by the fact that ritualism became a criminal offence in the second phase of the movement. So Anglo-Catholicism and a rebellious spirit became allies. The fact that the rebellion was about the details of church furniture and fashions is not the point: once a movement of nonconformity has been inspired in one area, it can spread to others. It is clear that in a number of slum neighbourhoods -in Hoxton and Haggerston, in Portsmouth, in Moss Side and Ardwick, in Sunderland, and elsewhere- Anglo-Catholicism became the religion of the poor and despised, a poor people's church, a church of the back streets. Ritualism was, as the churchwardens of St Alban's, Holborn, told the bewildered Archbishop Tait, "a working men's question" (16). And this points to a crucial element in Anglo-Catholic history: that the Anglo-Catholic movement in many places broke the identification of the Church of England with the establishment and with bourgeois conformity. Back street Anglo-Catholicism in some places had a closer affinity with the very poor and dispossessed, with the lumpen, than either conventional Anglicanism, the political parties or the trade unions.

But the Catholic socialists of the Noel-Grosee-Evans tradition saw pastoral ministry to the poor as only one aspect of the church's social task: there was the equally important task of nourishing a culture of resistance, a culture which would challenge and confront the false values of mammon. So Father Adderley spoke of the eucharist as "the weekly meeting of rebels against a mammon-worshipping world order" (17). At churches like Thaxted in Essex, and Burslem in the Potteries, the liturgy was seen as a foretaste of the coming age of justice. These Christian communities recognised that

vision and struggle to realise that vision must be nourished at the local concrete level. Without that contextual base among the common people, no social programme could succeed.

One aspect of this rebel tradition has been its ability to establish links of solidarity with marginalised groups without losing its own identity. Recent examples include the support for Viraj Mendis at the Church of the Ascension in Hulme, Manchester; the solidarity of the church at Goldthorpe with the miners' strike, the identification of St Botolph's Church, Aldgate, with the gay community, and the close involvement of Anglo-Catholic parishes in Liverpool, Brixton and Bristol in the uprisings of 1981 and their aftermath. This can, of course, be exaggerated. But it is interesting to see the way in which Catholic sacramentalists have been involved at key points in the struggles of oppressed and marginalised groups and communities in our society, especially in the inner urban areas.

Finally, the Anglo-Catholic social vision is one which moves beyond the Christian community and is concerned with the working out of God's purposes in the upheavals and crises of world history. It is a Kingdom theology rather than a church theology. The centrality of the Kingdom of God as the regulative principle of theology was a consistent theme of Anglo-Catholic social thought from the time that Percy Widdrington first used that expression in 1922.

For generations past the church has preached what is called "the Gospel". The call today is to return to what the New Testament calls "the Gospel of the Kingdom" - the Kingdom of God, the cardinal doctrine of our preaching, regulative of our theology, and the touchstone by which all the

activities of the church are tested. This will involve a Reformation in comparison with which the Reformation of the 16th Century will seem a small thing (18.)

In the 1950s Stanley Evans picked up the theme: the real division in the Christian world, he claimed, was about the Kingdom of God (19). To read Widdrington and Evans today is to see how extraordinarily prophetic and visionary they were. For this is precisely the situation we are in as we confront the new forces and new alignments within the Christian world.

In a sense the relationship of church and Kingdom and the issues around Kingdom theology -whether the Kingdom of God is this-worldly or otherworldly, social or personal, present or future, and so on, are the key issues in determining whether Christians have *any* vision for society, and, if they do, how vision and reality connect. Much depends on how we envisage that relationship. There are close parallels in the debate within Marxism about the relationship of utopian vision and scientific socialism. The dismissal of utopia and its pejorative usage -both by Marx and by his critic Karl Popper- has its parallels in Christian irritation and embarrassment with eschatology. The view that eschatological ideas, millenarianism, adventism, any focussing on the future, is irredeemably escapist, unreal and destructive of concrete political struggle, needs to be questioned. No doubt much visionary thinking is of this kind. But the Anglo-Catholic social tradition, with its deep sense of the life of the age to come, and its firm conviction that the Kingdom of God is not a purely otherworldly hope, stands as a challenge to contemporary socialism with its conspicuous lack of vision. As Tawney once said of the Fabians, "They tidy the room, but they open no windows in the soul" (20).

So it is significant that the utopian dimension in socialism is now being reasserted. From E.P.Thompson and Marcuse in the 60s to Raymond Williams, Hilary Wainwright, Sheila Rowbotham and Ruth Levitas today (21), the need for a recovery of vision and imagination, of dreams and of a politics of hope, is being emphasised. One of the insights of the Anglo-Catholic socialist tradition is the recognition that visions and dreams, while they are necessary parts of a politics of struggle, must be constantly tested against experiences of real people and concrete struggles -against the realities of homelessness, racial oppression, the collapse of communities. Anglo-Catholic social vision has always been worked out in the back streets, in specific neighbourhoods, in and through involvement with very concrete struggles. It has begun with the specific and the concrete. And this rootedness in concrete struggles is of crucial importance, for, as Gramsci stressed, foresight (or vision) reveals itself not as scientific knowledge but as a practical method of creating a collective will (22).

And so the emergence of a new social vision is not likely to be as a result of working parties of the CSU type: more likely as a result of concrete responses to concrete struggles in specific places. In every generation movements, religious and political, face challenges to their thought, their identity and their inner strength; challenges which, if not faced or not absorbed, will lead to serious damage and possibly decay. The two most crucial challenges to the thinking of both Anglo-Catholicism and of the socialist movement today come from the black community and from feminism. There is no way that either Catholic Christianity or the left, christian or secular, can survive those challenges without either significant transformation or significant wounding. For social vision, like history itself, does not arise out of thin air. As Marx wrote:

Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please. They do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (23).

It is out of our old history that our new history must be made.

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